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***Bright Half Life* pulls us into a profound cerebral performance experience**

By John Busbee for The Culture Buzz

Iowa Stage Theatre Company returns to the local theatre producers' scene with a superbly conceived and executed show, *Bright Half Life*. This inventive company takes a quantum leap past Zoom and other basic streaming performance options with this production. They leveraged national connections to obtain rights to a cutting-edge script, and feature two of our region's best talents. This all adds up to a very satisfying immersion into great theatre, coupled with the vicarious pride of local creatives blending exceptional elements together in producing it.

The pre-production process must have been fascinating. This production is available on demand through the Iowa Stage website through March 14, and should not be missed. This is an artful blend of theatre, cinema and technology. Audiences have the barriers of the expected series of presentation boxes eliminated because of their thoughtful approach to this show.

Playwright Tanya Barfield provides the rich creative clay from which this production is molded. Director Jennifer Nostrala imbues her cast with a freedom yet sensitivity that radiates throughout the story. Nostrala's deep understanding of Barfield's script gives its unfolding the patience, yet pace, needed to allow its content to fully manifest. A lifetime between Vicky (Rae Davis Fehring) and Erica (Kim Haymes) is believably distilled into a series of pivotal times between these two, including meeting each other, wooing, same-sex marriage, children, splitting, and even shades of mortality. What captivates, in addition to their nuanced and layered performances, is the non-linear presentation of their story. Each scene, each snippet of Vicky and Erica's lives, is like a piece to a massive jigsaw puzzle, recognizable elements that begin to fit together as time passes. Barfield's brilliantly conceived approach forces the audience to fully engage with her process of assembling the intertwining lives of Vicky and Erica.

Davis Fehring and Haymes bring a palpable connection to their roles. Their commitment to their characters is beyond excellent stage craft: They each wear the skin of two women who have lived a tumultuous life together. Add the successful production painting onto a technical canvas where stage performance is enhanced through a cinematic lens, and each of these women breathes a vibrant energy into their roles and their interactions.

The overall appeal of this show begins with its production design. Scenic and Lighting Designer Jay Jagim, further enhanced by the stellar sound design of Josh Jepson, give the foundation upon which this show is built. The clean, platformed set pieces provide micro-settings through which the nonlinear action flows. Crisp lighting, excellent film production work (led by G. Thomas Ferguson as Producer/Director/Editor and Bruce James Bales DP/Camera Operator) and fluid shifts between space and time give this a flow that draws the viewer along rather than disrupts their involvement. Simply, it works, and the audience is the beneficiary of a great story about relationships spun in a fresh way.

Take this time-traveling adventure before it ends. This show will be praised well past its final curtain, and everyone will want to be able to add their perspectives to the conversation.

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